



**A HEART'S
ASSURANCE**
Sigarettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 21



Book Twenty-One
Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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THANK YOU FOR READING!

INTRODUCTION

These vignettes originally came about as a way to keep readers engaged while I was writing the next book. Talk about ravenous readers! Each short, short, short story has been published on either the website (nammynools.com) or in the email newsletter that comes out on the twenty-fifth of each month.

I realized how much fun it was to expose little bits of the background stories that happen every day in Bellingwood. Because the Bellingwood books are written from Polly's perspective, unless she is directly involved in the action or with a character, we miss activities in other people's lives. These characters have developed enough that they enjoy telling their own stories, so it's time to make that happen.

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 21 — *A Heart's Assurance* — into one collection. These four short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who get an opportunity to offer a little slice of life from their own perspective.

Vignette #1

How Does Your Garden Grow?

January was a favorite time of the year for Judy Greene because seed catalogs arrived in her mailbox every day. As much as her husband, Reuben loved Christmas, Judy loved her catalogs. Dreaming about what to plant in her gardens gave her hours of pleasure. This year it was even more exciting since she was starting from scratch.

Her friends in California couldn't believe she left what she had there all behind, but what better way to discover something new? And a greenhouse — she was going to have her own greenhouse. She hadn't had one of those since she left the university, and even then, the work she did wasn't for personal enjoyment. This one was all hers.

Though the old greenhouse out at what would one day be the Bellingwood Bed and Breakfast was solid, and glass had been redone, there was no heat yet in the building. And so far, this January had been bitter cold. She did miss the more temperate climate in California around the bay, but Iowa had its own beauty.

Dick Mercer and Bill Sturtz had invited her to stand in the middle of the greenhouse one day last week and describe her dream work space. Dick took notes on scraps of paper and Bill assured her that since they were starting from scratch, nothing was impossible.

Judy had forgotten just how connected Iowans were. The depth of the networks available to her was incredible. While she'd been at the university, she'd had access to people from every possible area of expertise. She lost some of that upon retirement, but when necessary, she could always call a friend who knew someone.

She didn't expect to find that same type of connectedness within a few months of moving to Bellingwood. But that all changed one afternoon when she'd been joined by Simon Gardner at the coffee shop. He always seemed to know when she was there and showed

up just to buy her a cup of tea. That day she'd talked about finding someone to help her get the details right for her greenhouse. Simon had put his hand up to stop her, taken out his phone and made a call. Within ten minutes, his brother Sam, and Sam's wife, Jean were seated at the table with them.

Sam was a retired horticulture professor from Iowa State University and knew just the right people to help Judy. He and his wife were wonderful people, albeit a little too talkative and dare she say it, nosy. But they were genuine and warm-hearted. While they sat at the coffee shop that afternoon, Sam called Eliseo Aquila and invited him to join them as well.

Before she knew it, Judy was deep into a conversation with those men about what she wanted to do out at the Bed and Breakfast. Simon had simply smiled as he left Sweet Beans to return to his antique shop. She'd had great fun talking with Sam and Eliseo. There was so much they would be able to do together once she was in the greenhouse.

The woman who'd previously owned the farmstead where the Bed and Breakfast was located had loved her gardens, though they'd all long since grown over and gone wild. That was one of the things Judy loved about it - the wildness of the place. She looked forward to colorful wild flowers growing along paths leading to the creek. Bringing those grounds back to something that people could enjoy would take a great deal of work, but that didn't frighten her. She wasn't in this alone. Not by a long shot.

While Reuben loved what she did, he wasn't interested in being part of it. Whenever he could, he took off to meet up with blacksmiths around the state.

Work on the upstairs apartment had slowed considerably — almost to a stop. After the first surge of excitement, the bone-weariness of the work took hold of both Reuben and Judy. They couldn't tear out one more wall or haul one more load of debris down those steps.

This morning they'd finally talked about it. It was hard to admit they were no longer young and spry. Reuben made sense as he'd reminded her that demolition and construction weren't things

either of them enjoyed. Forty years ago, they could have pushed through it, knowing they had plenty of time and energy to do tedious labor while still following their dreams. Time was more compressed now. He didn't want to waste it doing work that they could afford to pay someone else to do, especially when he could hardly wait to put together his blacksmith shop.

Every time he left Bellingwood, he returned with a tool or piece of equipment that he needed. She was thankful that they'd already erected a building for him at the Bed and Breakfast to store those things so they weren't creating more clutter in this building than they already had.

He was meeting with Henry Sturtz right now to talk about proceeding with construction upstairs. Once Reuben finally admitted that he couldn't do it himself, he was ready to hand it off; Judy was ready for that, too. They'd done enough. It was time to let the professionals finish the task.

She sat up as she heard the back door open and close.

"Judy!" Reuben called out.

"In here."

He walked in and handed her a pile of envelopes. "I stopped at the post office. Looks like you got some fun mail."

"How was your meeting with Henry?" She took the proffered stack of mail and slid out a large padded envelope.

"It was good. He says I picked a great time to need him. He has some guys who could use the hours. He'll be here tomorrow morning with them to go over the project."

"Tomorrow morning?" Judy was only half paying attention, desperately wanting to open the envelope. She knew what it was and wanted to put her hands on what was inside. Then his words clicked. "Tomorrow morning?" she asked again. She jumped up, dropping the mail onto the cluttered table beside her chair. "I'm not ready for people to be in here tomorrow morning. I haven't cleaned in days."

"They won't be in here," he said, dropping onto the bed. "They'll go straight up the back steps. There's no reason for anyone to come this far in until we're ready for them."

She sat back down, her mind a-jumble. There were so many things she needed to do, but lately she found herself lost in plans and dreams. Having the stress of the upstairs apartment renovation lifted from her shoulders was a relief, but that only meant a thousand other project ideas filled the space in her head. She still felt weary. This was never going to end.

"Get your coat," he said.

Judy gave her head a quick shake. "What? Where are we going?"

"Ames. We need to do some shopping."

"For what? I don't need anything."

He chuckled. "Yes you do." Reuben nodded at the package she'd been fondling. "Open that first, though."

"It's just seeds."

"I know that. Open it and then we're going shopping."

She picked up the envelope and ripped the top off, then dumped the contents onto her lap. "They aren't even necessary seeds. I just wanted something."

"What did you get?"

Judy giggled nervously. "They're nasturtiums - nothing special. A childhood memory overtook me and I couldn't help myself."

"A memory?"

"Mother found wild nasturtiums one afternoon when we were out for a walk. I was pretty young. We picked them and took them home, then she cleaned the leaves and wrapped each one around a thin slice of ham and a little hunk of cream cheese. It was the first time I'd ever eaten a wild flower and it was wonderful." Judy nodded. "I think that was when I fell in love with plants and all their potential. People miss out on so much because they don't know what is right in front of them."

"Well, let's get some dirt in front of you today."

She peered at him. "What do you mean?"

"We're going to buy you a little indoor portable greenhouse, some grow lights, and a bag of dirt. You need to get those fingers back into the soil. It's been so long, I'd completely forgotten what you were like when you couldn't make that connection."

"I do miss it." Judy looked around. "I don't have a single plant in

here, do I?"

"Nope and that's a big miss on my part. We've been so busy neither of us paid attention to what was really important." He shook his head. "That's not true. You've been sending me out to visit blacksmiths around the state. I've fed my soul. Yours needs to be grounded again. Come on. I know just how to do that. One big bag of black dirt and you'll see. Everything will feel more normal."

"I thought it was just pure exhaustion that was draining me."

"We haven't done much upstairs in over a week. You're rested. Now, let's reinvigorate you."

Judy grabbed her coat off a pile of things on the floor. He was right. By the time she fell into bed tonight, she'd be a different person. The apartment upstairs would take care of itself, they'd deal with the mess in their living space when there was time, and the greenhouse would come together whenever it did. Soon she'd be able to make things grow again. It was time.

Vignette #2

You Are My Sunshine

Lydia looked up from the desk where she was working when she heard the doorbell ring. "Who is bothering me this morning?" she muttered, sliding her feet back into her slippers. She ran up the steps from the basement and groaned at the top. "Slow down, old lady. No need for your knees to hurt any more than they already do."

When she got to the front door, she pulled it open and laughed at the sight of Beryl standing outside the storm door — a single red rose in her teeth and a small bag from Sweet Beans in her hands.

"Come in," Lydia said as she opened the door. "What are you doing up and about so early?"

"I'm spreading joy and sunshine. Happy Galentine's Day!" Beryl held out the rose. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Now I can assume, but what is Galentine's Day? It sounds like you have a cold."

Beryl laughed. "It's a ridiculous word, isn't it? But I think it's also fabulous. Tell me this isn't one of your church lady days."

"No," Lydia said with a rumbling chuckle. "It's not a church lady day. Why?"

"Because part of Galentine's Day is having brunch with your best gals. I want to take you out."

Lydia glanced toward the stairs leading to the basement. Everything could wait. "Sure. Where are we going?"

"There aren't many options in Bellingwood. How about the diner?"

Lydia reached over to unzip Beryl's jacket.

"What are you doing, woman?" Beryl batted her hand away. "This isn't about being sexy, it's just us girls telling each other how much we love each other. Can't you do that and keep your hands off me at the same time?"

"I just wanted to see what you were wearing. How fancy are

you?"

"My lordie, chick-a-doo, you could have asked. I thought you were making a move."

Lydia shook her head and laughed. "Not likely, you dope. Are you all dressed up?" She gestured at herself. "Is this okay?"

"No, you aren't okay. Put something nicer on than a sweatshirt and flappy pants. What are you even thinking? You'd never be seen in public wearing clothes like that."

Lydia frowned. "We're only going to the diner, right?"

"Yes, and people will see you. March your little legs up those steps and change into a nice outfit. Move it, young lady. Move it."

"What's in the bag?"

Beryl opened it so Lydia could peek inside and see a decorated heart cookie. "Does that satisfy your curiosity? Go, go, go."

Lydia put on her best pouty face and stomped up the stairs to her bedroom. Since today wasn't a church lady day, she'd been looking forward to spending it in her comfortable clothes, messing about in her own home. It would figure that Beryl had something different to say about that. And that, from the woman who was always complaining that she didn't get enough time to work in her artist's shed without interruptions.

She pulled a pair of blue jeans out and opened a drawer to search for a sweater. She'd wear red tomorrow for Valentine's Day, but today it would be pink. That would hush the crazy woman downstairs. Lydia quickly changed, knowing that to leave Beryl alone very long could be disastrous.

When Lydia got to the bottom of the steps, she looked around for her friend. "Beryl? Where are you?"

"Find me!" Beryl called back.

Lydia walked into the kitchen and found Beryl standing on a stepstool, reaching into the cupboard over the refrigerator. "What in the world are you doing up there?"

"Isn't this where you keep your vases? I was going to put the rose in water."

"No, that's not where I keep them." Lydia walked into the dining room and opened the hutch, pulled out tall crystal vase, and went

back into the kitchen. "Now what are you doing?"

"I'm stuck. I can't get down."

"You have to be kidding me."

"Not kidding you. Something's caught up here. What am I going to do?"

Lydia walked around Beryl and looked up. "I see where you're caught, but what is it?"

"I don't know. Help me."

"Can you lift your arm up and over it?"

Beryl scowled. "Do you really think I haven't tried that? It won't release me."

"Please release me, let me go," Lydia sang.

"I'm going to kick your butt when I get out of this mess. What nasty traps have you set for people up here?"

"Take off your jacket. Once you're free from it, you can unhook the thing."

"I'm not taking off my jacket," Beryl said. "Who's to say what you'll do to me when you see my glorious form."

"I know what you're snagged on. It's literally a hook. Aaron installed it to hang a banner that Trinity made for me at Christmas. You've got yourself all twisted up in it now. You have to take off your jacket."

"Not until you leave the kitchen."

"What?"

Beryl repeated herself. "Not until you leave. Go. Away." She spat out the last two words.

"Okay. I'm leaving." Lydia headed for the dining room and said, "I'm gone. Now do your thing." She listened to the sound of scuffling and a few curse words. Then she heard something hard hit the step stool. "What was that?"

"I kicked the stupid stool — getting me in trouble and all that. You should teach those things better manners. You can come back in now."

"What is up with you and that jacket today? I've seen your entire wardrobe. Granted, most of it is pretty wild, but still."

"Who's driving? You or me? We have one more stop to make."

"Maybe I should drive. We'd hate for you to get lost."

Beryl grabbed Lydia and pulled her to the front door, stopping in front of the coat closet. "I'm driving. You won't die. I promise."

Lydia took her coat out, put it on, and followed Beryl to her car. "What's this?" she asked when she opened the passenger door.

"We have another stop to make."

"Andy?" Lydia picked up the rose and Sweet Beans bag and sat down, holding them on her lap.

Beryl got in and drove around the circle to the street. "She doesn't have to be at the library until one o'clock. I called her and told her to be ready early today, that I had plans for her."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"Because I wanted to surprise at least one of you and I knew that you'd be kind to me. You're kind to everyone."

Lydia patted Beryl's arm. "It's because I love you."

"Thank goodness," Beryl replied.

They drove to Andy's house and Beryl parked in the driveway, then took the bag and rose from Lydia. "You stay here. This won't take as long as it did at your house."

"Just stay out of her cupboards."

"Whatever."

True to her word, within minutes, the two women were in the car.

"Did you get her to unzip her jacket?" Lydia asked Andy.

"No, why?"

"She won't let me see what she's wearing under there."

Andy reached forward from the back seat and tried to pull Beryl's jacket off her shoulder.

"Leave me alone, you crazy woman," Beryl said. "You two are bound and determined to get me naked." She headed for the highway. "*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,*" she sang. Then she poked Lydia. "See, I can sing songs too."

"*You make me happy when skies are grey.*" Lydia returned.

Andy chimed in and the three of them continued. "*You'll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away.*"

They giggled as Beryl turned north and headed for the

downtown area. It was still early enough that the lunch crowd had yet to arrive at the diner, so she parked right in front.

"Come on, chickies. Let's get our feedbag on."

Lydia got out of the front seat and closed the door. "That is just gross. We're not horses or cows."

"We're sunshine," Andy said, jumping up onto the sidewalk and hooking her arm in Lydia's. "She said so."

They went inside and Lucy waved at them from the register. "Pick your table," she said brightly. "I'll be right there."

Beryl pranced to a table right in the center of the room. "How's this?"

"It's fine," Lydia said. "Though I'm a little worried about you."

"You sit there." Beryl pointed to the chair on her left. "Andy, you have to sit here." She pointed at the chair on her right.

"What is up with you?" Andy asked.

Beryl slowly unzipped her jacket and held it closed. She loosened the cuffs at her wrists, then pulled it off in one swift move to reveal a hot pink sweatshirt. Rhinestone arrows pointed to her left and to her right. Above the left arrow, it read, "She loves me." Under the right arrow were the words, "So does she." When Beryl turned so they could see the back, in bright purple letters were their three names stacked on top of each other. "Lydia + Beryl + Andy = Galentine's Day 2018."

"What do you think?"

"You're all sparkly," Lucy said, coming up to the table. "That's fantastic. I've never seen anything quite like it."

Lydia sat there, her mouth open. "I can't imagine you ever will again."

"Andy?" Beryl asked.

Andy blinked a couple of times, then pointed at Beryl's chair. "Sit down. Everyone's looking."

"That's what it's all about. Are you ashamed to be my best Galentine?" Beryl brought her oversized bag up from the floor and took out two more pink sweatshirts. "Will you wear them?"

Lydia gulped. "Uhhh."

With a laugh, Beryl shook one open. Embroidered over the chest

was a very pretty heart with words inside that read "Galentine's Day 2018."

Andy hitched in a breath. "I'll wear that. You had me a little nervous. I didn't want to disappoint you because I would never wear *that*." She pointed at Beryl's shirt.

Beryl laughed. "I know you two very well and I adore you. Sometimes I need to get you out of your comfortable houses and mess with your minds a little. Lucy, what shall we have to celebrate Galentine's Day?"

Vignette #3

Mama's Boys

Sylvie walked into her kitchen, too tired to wonder why the house was dark and why Padme hadn't barked her normal greeting. Where was that dog? Where were the boys?

She flipped the kitchen light on and was even more surprised to find the room clean. There were no dirty dishes in the sink and no opened bags of potato chips on the counter.

It had been a long, long week. All she wanted to do was lie down on the sofa with the remote in her hand and a blanket pulled up to her neck. If she made it up to her bedroom tonight, that would be a bonus. There was no guarantee of that.

Marta was right. They needed one more full-time person and at least one more part-time person at the bakery. Rachel needed more help with the catering business, too. Sylvie had been trying to do both, but she was nearly done in. She'd known it would take time to get the two businesses to the point where they could afford more help and she'd been willing to work hard as long as necessary. She'd never been involved in something this exciting before. It was fun to watch Bellingwood come alive and be part of the growth. She had never believed that there was a bottom to her stamina, but she was getting close.

The thing was, she couldn't blame anyone but herself. Jeff and Polly had been after her to hire more employees. The few she'd found that were qualified weren't interested in living in a small town and working full-time. She didn't know what it was they wanted. Well, she did and it made her mad. The young people she'd met so far wanted to work short hours and be paid the same salary as someone with more experience. She even had one young woman who expected Sylvie to pay for her commute time. Seriously? They weren't that desperate.

Marta had been a godsend. One day, out of the blue, there she was. The woman walked in, offered her time and became part of

Sweet Beans immediately. Sylvie needed a few more just like her.

She walked through the dining room, draped her coat over the back of a chair and headed for the sofa in the living room. Kicking off her shoes, she dropped into the corner of the sofa, pulled the blanket from the back over her legs and breathed an immense sigh of relief. She didn't have to smile at anyone, answer anyone's questions, smell baked goods, or do anything until tomorrow morning.

Now, where was everyone?

All she wanted to do was sink down a little further into the sofa, put her head on the pillow and fall asleep. Maybe, if she was lucky, she'd stay put until tomorrow morning.

No, not really. Not if she didn't know where her boys were.

The back door opened and Padme ran in, then jumped up on Sylvie's lap, happy to see her.

"Hello, you silly dog," Sylvie said.

Andrew walked into the living room and gave her a look of surprise. "You're home early."

"What?" she asked, bemused.

"You're home early."

"By fifteen minutes. I'd hardly call that early."

"We had a plan." He frowned down at her. "Jason and I worked it all out, right up to the minute you would walk in."

"I'm not leaving this house to come back in for you," Sylvie said. "You can't make me."

"It's okay," Jason said from the kitchen. "We can adjust. Get out here, punk."

Andrew shook his head and spun on his heels. "I'm not a punk."

Sylvie reached up to rub Padme's head. "What are they up to? Do you know?"

Padme jumped off the sofa and ran to the kitchen. That girl knew where the good stuff was.

"Can you boys manage your own dinner tonight?" Sylvie called out. "I'm exhausted. I don't even feel like eating."

"We've got it, Mom," Andrew yelled back. "Just sit still. We're taking care of everything."

"What does that mean?" she asked nobody in particular.

Jason came into the living room carrying two lit three-wick candles. He set them on the coffee table, then went over to the light switch and turned the overhead lights off.

"What's going on?" Sylvie asked. She put her feet on the floor and sat up straight.

He shook his head. "You stay there." Jason left the room, then looked over his shoulder when he was in the doorway. "Unless you have to go to the bathroom or something. But don't come into the kitchen, okay?"

"Okay." Sylvie smiled. They had something up their sleeve.

Andrew was next. He'd folded a dish towel over his left arm and brought one of their TV trays out, set it up beside her, then swished the towel off his arm and arranged it on the tray as a tablecloth. Sylvie did her best not to giggle. Good heavens, she loved having boys in her life. He reached into his front pocket and placed salt and pepper shakers on the table, making sure they stood straight on the terry cloth towel. From his other front pocket, he withdrew a paper napkin-wrapped set of silverware.

He left without saying anything and Sylvie smiled as she couldn't wait to see what would come next.

In a few minutes, Andrew returned, carrying a bowl of salad and a small plate containing a hard roll, butter, and a cup of dressing. He placed those on the table and hurried away. Sylvie recognized the roll and the dressing cup. They'd been to Davey's. What sweet boys.

Jason came into the room, passing Andrew. "Would you like water, iced tea, or ..." He proffered a bottle of her favorite mango pineapple juice. There hadn't been any in the house, which meant they'd stopped to buy that just for her.

"Could I have both the juice and some water?" she asked.

He nodded and with a small bow, said, "It would be my pleasure."

While she waited, Sylvie poured the dressing over the salad and cut the roll to butter it. She couldn't believe how much better she felt with just this bit of silliness happening in her life. The

overwhelming weariness had passed and she was ready to engage with her boys.

They returned together this time, Jason carrying two glasses and Andrew carrying a plate. She wanted to cry. They actually paid attention and had bought her favorite chicken and pasta meal. She made room on the small tray for the plate and when Jason looked around for a place to put the glasses, Sylvie leaned forward and moved two coasters into place on the coffee table.

"This is amazing, boys. How did you know I was at the end of my rope?"

"We haven't seen you all week. You've been really busy," Jason said. "You also haven't been eating very well, so we thought we'd get your favorite tonight. We're also not going to bother you. You can have the whole downstairs to yourself."

"You aren't a bother. Did you get something for yourselves? Bring it out and talk to me."

Jason blanched and looked at his brother.

"I'm on duty tonight, Mom," Andrew said. "Jason has a date."

"What about you?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Rebecca has that big family dinner. I won't hear from her until late. Jason paid for everything, though. I'm just his lackey." He grinned at his use of a big word. "We have dessert in the refrigerator and we even bought something else for you. Where is it, Jason?"

"Still in the kitchen. I'll get it." Jason took off, followed by the ever-hopeful Padme and then came back. He put a bottle in Sylvie's hand. "Whenever you're ready, Andrew and I talked about how to do it. He's going to fill the bathtub for you. We asked the lady at the pharmacy and she let us smell this. We thought you'd really like it. He'll take the candles up and everything so you can relax in the tub."

"You won't see me or Padme anymore tonight unless you need something," Andrew said. He turned to Jason. "Did you bring it?"

Jason nodded and put a small bell on the table. "You aren't supposed to clean up anything or put any of this away. When you're done eating, just ring the bell and Andrew will come down

and take it to the kitchen. When you want him to get your bath ready, ring the bell and tell him what you want. If you want him to turn the channels on the television for you, just ring the bell."

Andrew gave his brother a confused look. "She has the remote."

"Yeah, but if she doesn't want to lift a finger ..."

Andrew laughed. "Okay, I'll do it." He looked back at his mom. "Since Jason was the bank, I offered to be the brawn." Then he laughed again. "Because I'm always the brains. Am I right?"

Sylvie chuckled and patted the sofa beside her, moving Padme's bottom out of the way. "Did you at least buy your brother some supper, Jason?" she asked.

"He wanted a hamburger. It's out in the kitchen."

"Go get it, Andrew. Sit and talk to me."

"You sure?" Andrew asked. "This is supposed to be your night. We know how tired you get of talking to people all day long. It's okay if you just want to watch television."

"I'd rather you were here with me. Jason, I'm sorry you have to leave, but I hope you have a good time. Where are you going?"

"We're going over to Preston's house to watch the new Thor movie. Do you want me to stay? I can call Mel and tell her I'm not going." He creased his forehead. "I'd have to take the pop that I bought for the party to her, though, so she could take it for me."

"No," Sylvie said. "What you've done is wonderful. Thank you. Go have fun."

Jason nodded. "I won't be too late. Promise."

"I'm not worried," she replied.

Andrew stood in the middle of the room. "Are you sure you don't want to be alone?" he asked. "I was going to take my hamburger upstairs so I didn't bother you."

"I'd really rather you sat with me. I want to hear about your week."

He shook his head. "You really don't. It wasn't awesome."

"Now I really do," she said. "Go on. Bring another table out and get your dinner. Get some rawhide for Padme to chew on while we eat so she doesn't bother us. Jason?"

He walked back in from the kitchen with his coat on. "Yeah?"

"This was really thoughtful. Was it your idea?"

He shook his head. "Kinda, but not really. I knew we should do something, but it was Rebecca who told us what we were supposed to do. Andrew must have told her and she cornered me at lunch with the whole plan, including the bubbles. I'm going to have her plan my wedding. She knows everything."

"Your wedding?" Sylvie tilted her head. "Do you have something to tell me?"

His head shot up and he stepped backward. "No. What makes you think that?"

"You mentioned a wedding."

"I was just thinking about how Rebecca always makes these great plans to do nice things for people."

Sylvie nodded and smiled at him. "She is good at that. Okay, go on. I love you and thank you for listening to her."

"Make Andrew do the bath thing for you tonight, okay?" Jason said.

"We'll see. Good night." She waved at him and he turned to leave.

Andrew came back with another TV tray under one arm and the container from Davey's in his other hand. He'd tucked a can of pop in his pocket. "You're really sure?"

"Sit. Talk to me."

He sat and Sylvie felt herself relax even more. She loved her boys.

Vignette #4

This Old House

"Throw that away," Aaron said. "Dan doesn't care about a seventh grade book report."

Lydia stuck her lower lip out. "But his teacher told him he had really good insight. She gave him an A-plus."

"Honey, I love you, but if you save every paper those kids wrote, I might as well put the trash bags away."

"Don't you think we should pack things up and let them decide what they want to keep? I hate to throw something away that might bring back a memory for them."

Aaron hovered over his wife who was sitting on a chair amidst stacks of boxes and plastic bins. She'd been planning this day for a week. A pile of labels and markers were neatly arranged on the table in front of her, a roll of trash bags lay beside the trash bin he'd hauled in from the garage, and two well-marked maps of their house and garage were placed on a corner of the table for both of them to see. On one, she'd marked where every single box that had been packed up over the last thirty years had been stowed, and on the other, where she expected those boxes to be put when he brought them into the basement. The woman was on a mission and once this train started rolling, there was nothing he could do to stop it until she was finished.

"Go get the boxes from the attic," Lydia said, pointing to the stairway. "Leave me alone."

Sighing loudly, Aaron headed for the stairs pulling along a two-wheel cart. "Nobody would believe how well you've stashed things around this house. The parts the world sees are neat and tidy, but look behind the closet doors and they'd find a different home. You're a hoarder, woman." The clattering of the cart bumping up the stairs was loud enough that he shouted to make himself heard.

"I am not," she yelled after him.

"Are too," he called back to her.

"Am not." She chuckled. He'd been grumpy all morning. She'd tried to warn him that today was coming and was surprised he hadn't found a reason to be in Boone. This task had been on her want-to-do list for years.

When everyone was here for Christmas, Sandy had found a box filled with t-shirts from her activities in high school. They'd all been washed, neatly folded, and packed away. Trinity had been ecstatic to wear shirts that had once belonged to her mother. That experience led to conversations about everyone else's mementos. While Sandy's box of t-shirts had been easily accessible, Lydia stopped them from tearing through the attic, the garage, closets, and basement hiding places where she'd stuffed their things. It was enough to have a house filled with her family and all of their belongs. Lydia refused to allow her kids to pull out boxes that they wouldn't repack and put away. They'd complained loudly. She'd ignored their moans and groans.

While it had been an insignificant conversation for her five kids, Lydia realized that it was long past time she delivered their personal memories to them. Her youngest, Jim, finished college two years ago. He and Kate lived together in Atlanta and Lydia hoped there would be a wedding within the next year or so. If she was going to unload her children's keepsakes, now was the time, no matter how much Aaron grumped at collecting it all into one space.

As she looked around the piles that were gathered, Lydia felt a little overwhelmed. This project was going to take weeks. Aaron had suggested that she do it a little bit at a time, but she didn't want to get started, pack up one box and then find another container in the attic that held things belonging with that box. Better that she create chaos in one time and place so she could bring order in the end.

Lydia opened a box marked as "Dan's Trophies." There wasn't a trophy to be seen. Instead, the box was filled with science fiction paperbacks. Now she didn't know what to do. Did he really consider these to be his trophies?

The sound of thumping down the steps from the second floor to the first floor made her smile. Aaron really was being patient about

this.

She set the box of books on the floor and un-flapped the next box. There were his trophies. It wouldn't surprise her at all that Dan had mislabeled the boxes on purpose just to mess with his mother. She wrote out a label, taped the box closed, and carried it to the end of the room she'd designated as Dan's space. When she went back to stand over the box of books, she snapped a quick picture of it and sent it to her son asking if he wanted her to keep the books. She knew of several good homes for extra books in town.

Aaron thumped down the basement stairs with a load of five boxes on the cart. "I have two more of these to bring down," he said with a whine in his voice.

"Two more boxes?" Lydia asked sweetly.

"Hah," he said, a forced laugh following the word. "Two more loads. There are two old bedsteads up there. What do you want to do with those?"

Lydia's eyes flew up. She hadn't been in the attic in years. "I'd forgotten about them. I can't imagine any of the kids want them. What do you think?"

"Take them to a thrift store."

"What else did you find?"

"Boxes of decorations from your mother's house, it looks like. Pottery and some weird brass stuff."

Lydia laughed. "I don't know why I kept that. She bought it after I moved out so I'm not personally attached to anything. It should go to the thrift store, too."

He narrowed his eyes. "Today?"

"No. It might as well stay up there with the bedsteads for another ten years. Anything else?"

"Her Christmas decorations and some wooden frame thingie."

"It's a quilting frame."

Aaron peered at her. "Your mother quilted?"

Lydia quietly shook her head.

"Where did it come from, then?"

"I rescued it from Dolly Randall's estate sale."

"She died more than twenty years ago. That thing has just been

sitting up there for twenty years?"

Lydia grimaced and then gave him a helpless smile. "I forgot about it?"

"Were you planning to learn to quilt?"

"At the time I thought I'd donate it to the ladies at church, but then I realized they didn't need it."

"So you hid it in the attic." He shook his head. "And I sent you to help poor old Mr. Leon. You could have given him lessons on hoarding."

Lydia tossed a book from the box at her feet at Aaron. It caromed off the boxes and landed on the floor. "At least I'm trying to clear this out."

"About time. What would your friends think?"

She marched over and stood in front of him, leaving less than two inches between them. Poking her index finger into his chest, she spoke quietly and menacingly. "If you ever tell anyone what is happening in this house right now, I will put vinegar in your pies and alum in your fried chicken. None of our friends are welcome here until I have this all organized and managed. Do. You. Understand. Me?" She emphasized the last four words with a poke at each word.

Aaron backed away, running into the wall. "Yes, ma'am. But we'll have to tell them something."

"I don't care if you tell them that I'm sorting through the kids' keepsakes, but you dare not speak of the extent of it. Are we clear?"

"Quite clear, Commandant," he said with a snappy salute. "May I be excused to retrieve the last boxes?"

"You're excused."

He unloaded the boxes for her, then hauled the cart back up the steps. She smiled at his back before wandering over to see what he'd brought down. Lydia opened the top box and pulled out a well-worn stuffed teddy bear that had never left Marilyn's side when she was a toddler. She took it to school the first day of kindergarten and when she came home that afternoon, the bear was placed on her bed and never left her room again. Some nasty little girl had told Marilyn she was a baby for carrying her teddy bear

and that was the end of it. No amount of coaxing could ever convince Marilyn that it was okay for her to love that old bear in public. Though she never took it outside again, she spent every night with it snuggled in her arms.

Lydia rubbed her thumb on the fur between the bear's ears and put it back in the box, then took out a folder filled with papers. It was labeled in her own handwriting. *Marilyn's Elementary Papers*. She smiled and opened it, then flipped through the colorful sheets of paper filled with Marilyn's practice handwriting, some early math worksheets, and pictures she'd drawn and colored. Toward the bottom of the stack, Lydia frowned as she came across something entitled *Mommy and Me*. She took it out and laid the folder back into the box.

Aaron's thumping down the stairs accompanied her walk back to the chair where she'd been seated earlier. She had no memory of this paper. As she read Marilyn's sweet little words about how they spent a Saturday, her eyes became suffused with tears. They'd had a simple day - breakfast at Joe's Diner, shopping for a special blue butterfly hair bow in Boone, and lunch with Daddy. The afternoon had been spent at home, making cupcakes for school the next day. Lydia couldn't remember what she'd done with the other kids or why she and Marilyn had been together, but she did remember her adorable first-born daughter with scads of energy, a bright smile, and eyes that watched everything.

"What happened?" Aaron said. He glanced at the open box. "Better question. What did you find?"

Lydia held the paper up for him to see. "Do you remember when our babies were babies?"

"Of course I do." He unloaded the cart. "We had a pretty wonderful family. You did that. I was so busy and you made it seamless. I don't tell you often enough how much I appreciated what you did with our kids."

She smiled up at him. "There were times I wondered if they'd live to adulthood. Sandy and Dan were going to be the death of me. That day Chief Mitchell showed up at my front door to tell me they had broken into the swimming pool, I thought I'd done something

horribly wrong. He felt so bad at having to accuse your kids of vandalism."

"We got through it and they're great kids now. I'm proud of them and I'm thankful for you." Aaron came over and gave her a hug. "Now I have to tell you something you aren't going to like."

"What's that?"

"Polly called. I need to go over to her house."

"Don't tell me," Lydia said. "A body?"

"Not this time. I'll tell you all about it later. Let me run up and get the last load of boxes and then I'll take off."

"You're just glad to be able to take a break from my chaos." She gestured at the mess scattered around the room.

Aaron looked away and then back at her sheepishly. "Maybe a little bit. Do you want me to bring supper home tonight? You shouldn't have to cook after working on this today."

"There are always leftovers."

"Is that what you want to have for dinner?"

She grinned at him. "Not really."

Aaron bent over and kissed Lydia's forehead. "I'll take care of dinner and tomorrow you can point me to the right stacks of boxes in the garage. Maybe we should rent a trailer and hit the road this summer. Do you think we can visit each of our kids and empty it along the way?"

"That would be fun," Lydia said, her face lighting up. "I'd love to see Jim and Kate's place. We could visit your sister while we were in Georgia."

He nodded. "Start planning our trip, then." Grabbing the cart, he headed for the stairs. "This house isn't going to know what to do when all of its memories are spread out across the country."

Lydia watched him go up the steps. "It already misses those little children," she said to herself. "What a wonderful life this old house has seen. I can't wait to be part of what it has yet to see."

THANK YOU FOR READING!

I'm so glad you enjoy these stories about Polly Giller and her friends. There are many ways to stay in touch with Diane and the Bellingwood community.

You can find more details about Sycamore House and Bellingwood at the website: <http://nammynools.com/>

Join the Bellingwood Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pollygiller>

for news about upcoming books, conversations while I'm writing and you're reading, and a continued look at life in a small town.

Diane Greenwood Muir's [Amazon Author Page](#) is a great place to watch for new releases and to find all of the books she's written.

Follow Diane on Twitter at twitter.com/nammynools for regular updates and notifications.

Recipes and decorating ideas from the books can often be found on Pinterest at: <http://pinterest.com/nammynools/>

And for Sycamore House swag, check out Polly's CafePress store: <http://www.cafepress.com/sycamorehouse>